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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 001929

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STATE FOR EAP

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/12/2018
TAGS: [MARR](#) [MCAP](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [RP](#) [MASS](#)
SUBJECT: PHILIPPINE MILITARY IN CONTROL IN CENTRAL
MINDANAO, ASKS U.S. TO LOWER MILITARY PROFILE IN MINDANAO

REF: A. MANILA 1922 (PHILIPPINE FORCES SEEK TO ENFORCE
RULE OF LAW)
[1](#)B. MANILA 1875 (PHILIPPINE FORCES PREPARED BUT
RESTRAINED IN FACE OF VIOLENCE)

Classified By: Amb. Kristie A. Kenney, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: As fighting between the Philippine military and elements of Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) forces entered its third day on August 12, government forces appeared to be re-gaining control over seized villages in central Mindanao, with two key Muslim insurgent units retreating to their command bases. The instability surrounding the fighting led Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Chief of Staff General Alexander Yano to request that all U.S. forces in central Mindanao stay confined to brigade-level or higher AFP compounds as a precaution against U.S. personnel being caught up in the violence or accused of engaging in combat. Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro also decided to cancel a joint exercise between U.S. and Philippine Air Force units scheduled to begin August 16. Recognizing the sensitivity surrounding the situation in Mindanao, the Mission recommended canceling the August 12 planned port call of the USS RENTZ in Zamboanga City after consulting with local politicians, some of whom have been particularly vocal in their opposition to the draft peace deal worked out between the Philippine government and the MILF. Mission personnel have emphasized to senior Philippine military leaders that they should do everything possible to try and attend the annual Mutual Defense Board/Security Engagement Board Executive Committee meeting next week in Hawaii, but domestic demands could preclude the attendance of Yano and others. END SUMMARY.

PHILIPPINE FORCES TAKING CONTROL

[1](#)2. (C) As of August 12, Philippine military forces in central Mindanao appeared to be gaining the upper hand against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front's (MILF) 104th and 105th Base Commands, forcing their retreat to safe havens. The MILF retreat came after three days of sporadic fighting with Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) troops in central Mindanao that displaced thousands of civilians. Government forces have reported few casualties, but heavy shelling by Philippine units reportedly has wounded and killed a number of MILF fighters. The MILF forces were hampered in their ability to wage effective operations by limited logistical capability and low stocks of ammunition and food. Additionally, it appears that the government's previously developed operations plan (ref B) was successful in cutting

resupply routes for the MILF forces.

U.S. ASKED TO LOWER PROFILE IN CENTRAL MINDANAO

13. (C) The instability in central Mindanao led AFP Chief General Alexander Yano to request that U.S. military personnel in central Mindanao remain confined to brigade-level or higher AFP compounds. Yano stressed that this was a precautionary measure due to the large number of displaced civilians and the continued threat of sporadic violence in the area. Over 100,000 people have fled their homes, prompting the United Nations to announce that it would deliver 400 tons of rice to the afflicted areas to help feed the refugees. Yano also emphasized that the restrictions did not apply to U.S. forces in Zamboanga or the Sulu Archipelago, that they were temporary, and that they were to help prevent any accusation of U.S. personnel being involved in the fighting.

14. (C) Philippine defense officials' actions are a visible sign that the Arroyo administration may be concerned about a possible negative reaction towards routine U.S. bilateral military engagement, as detractors attempt to widen the circle of those they want to criticize for current difficulties in the ongoing peace process. On August 11, Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro canceled a previously scheduled bilateral training exercise involving U.S. F-15E and Philippine OV-10 fighter aircraft, citing sensitivities surrounding the current military operation in

MANILA 00001929 002 OF 002

Mindanao and the need to use all Philippine assets for that campaign. To soften concerns of U.S. military presence in Mindanao at this sensitive time, the Mission decided to cancel the August 12 port call of the USS RENTZ to Zamboanga City after consulting with local officials. While historically very supportive of U.S. presence in his city, Zamboanga Mayor Celso Lobregat has expressed discontent with the Philippine government's proposed inclusion of some of Zamboanga's territory in the new Muslim political entity being negotiated as part of the peace process.

COMMENT

15. (C) The speed with which the AFP demonstrated combat superiority over MILF forces underscores the progress that has been made in the Philippine military's ability to plan and execute offensive operations. At the same time, despite warnings of an expanded conflict, it appears Philippine forces are proving they can restore peace and order without engulfing the entire Mindanao population in a wider war. Nevertheless, large numbers of displaced civilians are catching the eye of international organizations and it remains to be seen how quickly the Philippine government can render humanitarian assistance to the refugees and return them to their homes. The Mission continues to monitor the situation in central Mindanao and how it may affect future bilateral training activities and other engagement, particularly at the senior levels. Mission personnel have emphasized to the Philippine military leadership that they should do everything possible to try and attend the annual Mutual Defense Board/Security Engagement Board Executive Committee meeting next week in Hawaii, but domestic demands could preclude the attendance of Yano and others. END COMMENT.

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KENNEY